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## Book Review: Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity and the Making of Modern Laos

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Embodied Nation. Sport, Masculinity and the Making of Modern Laos

By Simon Creak. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 327.

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There are two types of academic studies of sport – those which focus primarily, sometimes even exclusively, on sport itself and those which use sport as a lens through which to examine broader historical, social and political themes. Simon Creak's *Embodied Nation* belongs unequivocally to the latter camp and prompts a paraphrased version of the question posed by Trinidadian writer and political activist C. L. R. James, "What do they know of sport who only sport know"? In his examination of the place of sport and physical culture in the development of modern Laos, Creak amply demonstrates that he knows about considerably more than just the development of sport and physical culture in that country.

As Creak notes, "Laos may seem an unlikely place to study the history of sport and related aspects of physical culture" (p. 3). It did not join the Olympic movement until 1979 and has failed to win a medal to date. However, the guiding principle of his study is that "Despite stereotypes of indolence and backwardness – or perhaps because of them – the vicissitudes of modern Lao history have been paralleled by developments in sport, physical education, military training, and other physical pursuits" (p. 3). It is these developments which Creak examines in this meticulously researched and insightful book.

*Embodied Nation* consists of an introduction and eight chapters which are both chronological and thematic. These address such themes as embodying military muscularity, sport and the theatrics of power, and socialist cultures of rhetoric and physicality. There are also forty-two

pages of notes which reflect the extensive research which the author has conducted. This is further exemplified in the bibliography which contains not only a comprehensive list of relevant academic sources but also indicates the vast number of archival sources accessed by Creak.

The focus that is present throughout the book is the quest to establish a “real” Lao national identity and the role that sport and physical activity have played in that endeavour. The underlying premise is that “just as the borders of modern Laos were forged as a result of the military and epistemological clash between France and Siam, successive concepts of Lao culture have grown from subsequent events and ideologies and the ways in which they have been relocated in the Lao context by differing political regimes” (p. 5).

The book examines Lao national culture over the entire twentieth century while simultaneously assessing the history of sport and physicality in modern Laos. Creak draws upon well-known approaches to national identity, including those of Anderson and Billig, as well as the influential work of Connell on masculinity. He also engages with existing scholarly work on the emergence of modern Laos, adding additional insights from his own research. Particularly instructive in this respect is his thorough examination of the terms used in the Lao language to identify specific forms of physical culture. This helps the reader to understand the blurred lines between traditional ritualistic activities and modern sport.

One of the most valuable aspects of this book is the regular use of photographs and other images. It is surprising how many books concerned with the body contain no images at all of

human bodies. In a particularly impressive chapter on the embodiment of military masculinity, Creak employs photographs to document the transfer of power from France to Laos in 1950 with sustained emphasis on the role of the *École Nationale des Cadres de Jeunesse et d'Éducation Physique* and its highly influential director, Phoumi Nosavan. This period witnessed the coming together of the male body, the Lao nation and Buddhism as the state religion with visual technologies producing “militaristic representations of men and the male body as the agent of Laos’ national future” (p. 106). In subsequent years, the National Games of 1961 and 1964 were used to demonstrate national unity and progress. What had already evolved, however, was a period of disunity with Laos becoming increasingly embroiled in the regional politics of the Cold War. Whilst Nosavan remained a highly influential figure on account of his ability to combine tradition and modernity, his influence was on the wane by 1964.

The years that followed saw continued involvement by Laos in sporting competitions especially the South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games which were embraced at the time as the pinnacle of Laos’ sporting engagement. Here was an opportunity for Laos to show respect for but also seek emulation of Thailand while simultaneously providing a context for the playing out of the fierce rivalry between the two countries which acquired even more significance, in Laos at least, on the occasion of the 1969 Kings’ Cup in football. Although the Laos team lost the semi-final of the competition and also the third-place playoff match, it had defeated Thailand 4-3 in an earlier round. Given nationalism’s need for significant others, it is little surprise that the victory was welcomed with great enthusiasm by sports administrators, fans and the press. A relatively familiar pattern to students of the relationship between nationalism and sport was perhaps beginning to emerge with sport being used as a major vehicle for the external promotion of the nation. In December 1975, however, the Lao

People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) took power, ending a thirty-year struggle and leading to the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic ((LPDR). Sport was about take a somewhat different, although to sport scholars an equally familiar, turn.

Efforts to build a mass sport and physical culture movement were now directed towards the production of socialist persons with the state arguably taking precedence over the nation. The ultimate aim of the state, however, was to continue to build the nation and rescue national culture from the sins of capitalism. Lessons were sought from the experiences of the People's Republic of China and from Vietnam rather than from the Soviet Union and its satellites. Traditional sports such as Lao boxing were emphasised more than in previous years while mass sport, especially gymnastics or calisthenics, was regarded as having the potential to foster the characteristics of the new socialist person – diligence, discipline and other attributes associated with work and productivity. Once again Creak complements his analysis with an image – this time of photograph of Kaysone Phomvihane, one of socialist Laos' most prominent leaders, in a striking pose aimed at showing the new socialist person not only as a patriot but also as a physical being. Ultimately what this revolutionary approach lacked, however, was adequate infrastructure and personnel.

As in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, elite sport offered a different vehicle for demonstrating the regime's strength. This was to lead to Laos' participation in the Moscow Olympic Games of 1980, albeit only in boxing, shooting and athletics. During this period, according to Creak, "socialist spectator sport kept the Lao revolution in motion" (p. 223). In so doing, however, we might argue that it also prepared the way for sport in the post-socialist

era when the orthodox mantras, as Creak calls them, of national development and cultural nationalism would once again take centre stage.

If I have one minor quibble about the book, it is that there is less information about specific sports than about sporting events and physicality more generally. Mention is made of football at fairly regular intervals, basketball, badminton and others sports much less so. It would have been useful to know more about how popular certain sports are, who plays them and how precisely they are organised. It is worth noting with this in mind that Creak concludes by emphasising “the underlying concern with physicality” (p. 246) which is to be found in popular thinking about health, wealth and well-being and has also given substance to state ideology and power. This is significant given that throughout much of the western world, physical activity, including sport, is now regarded by many as a means to certain ends – tackling obesity, ensuring longevity and an active old age, combatting disease and so on. It would be ironic if the lack of sporting achievement by Laos has made it easier to move more rapidly to perceptions of the body that have come to dominate discourse in the US, the UK, Australia and elsewhere over an extended period of time despite ongoing concomitant pressures to win medals.

It is unusual to conclude a review by quoting from the glowing statements to be found on the dust jacket of the book that is being reviewed. In this case, however, the words used to describe *Embodied Nation* are fitting – “superb”, “well-written”, “outstanding” and “highly original”. Creak has much to offer sport scholars as well as those with a specialist interest in the modern history of Laos or in south-east Asia more generally. He is to be heartily congratulated on this fine publication.

